

# Duxbury Clipper

SECTION

B

Vol. LI No. 26

Wednesday, June 27, 2001

Section B

## A Journey Down Surplus Street

### PART V. THE SHOEMAKER

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

As with the Brewster family whose houses we visited last week in our series, the Bartlett family also represented the working class of the 1800s. Now as we journey down Surplus Street, we will discover how Duxbury survived the decline of the shipbuilding industry through the ingenuity of its residents and the necessity of shoes. A pathway can be more than just a link to other paths. It can connect people to enterprises, causing friendships to flourish, which once established can leave a lasting bond between visitor and dweller.

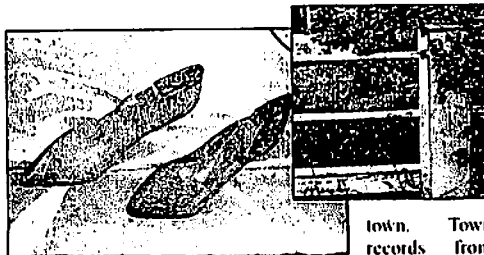
#### Seth Bartlett House 37 Surplus Street

In 1833, Seth Bartlett purchased for \$70 land owned by Joseph Brewster, a prosperous shipwright. He had married Nancy Bradford, the daughter of Zadock and Lucy (Gray) Bradford of Duxbury, in 1822, and the couple had four children, Seth Eldridge, Henry and twin daughters, Caroline A. and Sarah who both died within their third month of life. A very small stone in the Mayflower Cemetery marks the twins' burial.

A census from 1855 shows Bartlett's occupation as a cordwainer also called a shoemaker. The report describes a shop located on Bartlett's property. It was typical for a shoemaker's shop to be on or

attached to his property since this business started as an "at home" occupation. "Scores of small one-room buildings, some of them no more than eight by ten feet in area, dotted the county," noted Peter Rapelye in his study, "Impact of the Shipbuilding Industry on a Small New England Town: Duxbury, Ma."

The shoemaking industry found its beginnings with the women of the town. The wives of many sea captains needed "to pass time and to generate some extra revenue, so they would organize small shoe manufacturing, enlisting their children in the piece-work," said Rapelye. During the winter months when the shipping and fishing business dwindled, many of



(Top) Remnants of Duxbury's Shoemaking Industry courtesy of Rita Luckey. (Right) The fence at 26 Surplus Street with its distinctive feature.

the men also made boots and shoes.

It was all done by hand with many of the elite shipbuilding families typically using a favorite shoemaker who fashioned their shoes and boots to their client's preferences.

From the 1830s through the 1850s, shoemakers in Duxbury produced not only for those living in town, but also for other areas including England and parts of Europe. "The southern states and the Caribbean area became Plymouth County's principal customers," wrote James Pye in *The Duxbury Book*.

Shoe shops also became notorious places for "the less arduously employed gentry" as "male gossip mills," added Pye. No doubt Seth Bartlett's shop served the same capacity for the locals living in the area.

Surplus Street had its share of shoemakers and shoe shops. Asa Brewster made shoes when he was not out fishing for a living. Later his house at 26 Surplus Street became a bustling shoe shop where William James Alden and his son Willy made shoes and boots. Not far away at the end of Humblebee Lane there was another shoe shop at Andrew Stetson's property.

The number of cordwainers along Surplus Street was a true reflection of the entire

town. Town records from 1830 to 1850 reported 75 shoemakers, bootmakers, or cordwainers during that period.

Evidence of this industry can still be found in Duxbury with original shoe shops now converted into sheds and office spaces. The fence at 26 Surplus Street still has a section in it that lifts out and once allowed a cart to be wheeled to the rear of the property and filled with fin-

completed shoes were delivered to Duxbury from the large shoemaking centers of Abington, Rockland, and North Bridgewater (Brockton)...and individual families, or workers performed one or two of the steps of cutting, sewing, or tacking in the shoe-making process," explained Pye.

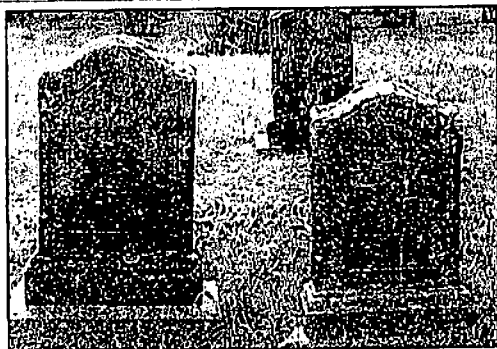
What had originally begun as a way for seafarers' wives to make additional income would later become a family's sole means of livelihood, and would also keep the town of Duxbury afloat during the decline of the shipbuilding era.

"The period from 1850 to 1870 was one of the darkest in Duxbury's economic history," said Pye. The drastic decline of the town's major economic contributor, shipbuilding,



Standing outside the Seth Bartlett House, c. 1903.

COURTESY OF DUXBURY



Bartlett grave site at Mayflower Cemetery.

PHOTO BY DEBORA KATZ

ished shoes and boots and then taken back to the road and placed on a wagon for export. (see photo)

In the beginning, the leather used to make the shoes was tanned at the shop or residence, but soon tanning became its own industry, and leather was delivered to the shoemaker to make the shoes and boots.

"Leather and partially

took its toll on families in Duxbury. Many of the industries which supported the seafaring business were no longer needed as the ship workers moved away to Salem and other ports near Boston. "Those who did not leave had only fishing and small farms to support them; there were few ways to generate cash."

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# The Shoemaker

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explained Pye. Manufacturing shoes "kept the wolf on the other side of the potato patch," said one Duxbury resident.

Seth Bartlett continued working as a shoemaker, but his sons did not follow in his footsteps. His son Seth died in 1852, leaving a son named Henry Foster Bartlett. Seth's son Henry pursued work in New York at an advertising agency, and summered each year at the house on Surplus Street. He would eventually meet and marry Emma Jones Stowall of New Bedford. The couple went to live permanently in New York, but came for visits in the summer months. They had three children, Etta E. who was born in 1861, William H.S. born on July 19, 1868, and Charles Bradford Bartlett who came two years later in 1870.

Their grandfather, Seth Bartlett died in 1884 willing the house to his wife and then to his son Henry in trust for his children. His wife Nancy lived on in the residence until she was 91 years old.

Architecturally, the house took on an entirely new façade and second floor in 1896, the same year Henry passed away from pneumonia. This once simple Cape Cod, similar to the neighboring homes of Joseph Brewster and Joseph Brewster Jr., was dramatically changed to a two and 1/2 story house with Italianate and Queen Anne features.

A large barn was also built some time in 1882, and there is still a carving found in one of its wooden beams that reads: 'HOUSE-1830,' 'STABLE-1882,' '2ND FLOOR-

1896.'

This ornate home became one of Duxbury's few Victorian structures, towering over surrounding homes. It was a common style for the period, but what makes the renovation unique is that it occurred during an economically depressed time in Duxbury.

There is another intriguing element surrounding this

including his mother Emma.

Fortunately the Bartlett presence in the Queen Anne styled house on Surplus Street continued through Emma and Henry's daughter who was the only one to marry and have a child. Etta Bartlett married Charles N.B. Wheeler, a Harvard graduate, in 1891. Wheeler became a teacher, working at Partridge Academy, which was located at the site of the current Town Hall. Later, Wheeler and his wife Etta moved to St. Paul Minnesota, where the young teacher started a private school for boys known as St. Paul Academy.

"Grandfather was highly revered...the school had a plaque hung in his honor, but he got so angry by this that he had it taken down and told them, 'not until I'm dead,' recalled Barbara Jameson Lawson.

The Wheelers had one daughter, Christine, who was born in 1893. The couple returned to the house on Surplus Street every summer. This tradi-

tion continued from one generation to the next as Christine married Gordon Rogers Jameson and returned each summer with her own children. During these years of summer visits, Emma Bartlett and her son Charles continued to live year-round in the house. Charlie stayed on after his mother's death in 1935.

Once Gordon Jameson retired from his career as a mechanical engineer, he and Christine decided to make the Victorian house their permanent residence. "They put heat in, and fixed it all up; and Dad decided he needed a hobby, so he fixed up the barn and put up a sign, 'Uncle Jim's Hobby Shop' on the front of it," said Lawson.

Jameson started a furniture

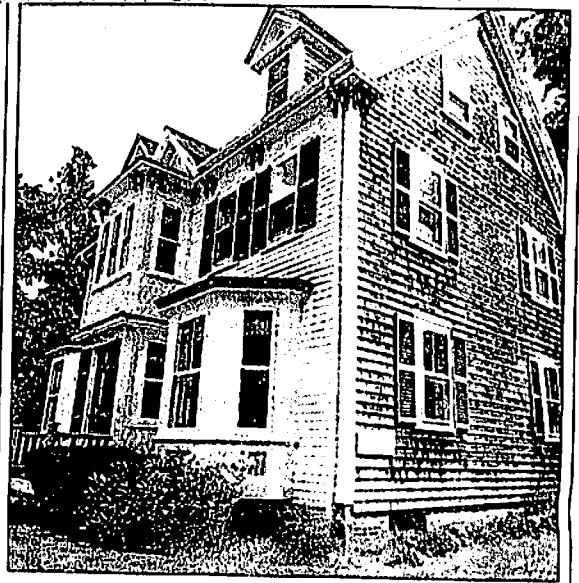


Christine Jameson at an exhibit of her famous painted trays.

COURTESY OF BARBARA LAWSON

Cape Cod turned Victorian home. After Henry Bartlett passed away in 1896, his wife Emma left New York and made the house on Surplus Street her permanent home along with her sons Charles and William. One day, however, William, a courier for a bank in Boston, got on a train with money to be delivered to New York and was never seen again. Emma Bartlett stayed on in the house hoping her son would return to her.

Before her death in 1935, she had a headstone placed in her son William's memory at Mayflower Cemetery with the open date of death: "19—." This incomplete gravestone can still be found today at the cemetery among all the other Bartlett family members



The Seth Bartlett House.

PHOTO BY SHELLEY BARTZ

making business in the old barn, while his wife began working on her skills as a tray painter, a hobby that would turn into a very lucrative profession. She became a member of the Brazier Guild of Boston, which was no small feat. "She also had a thriving business with Shreve, Crump & Low, and couldn't keep up with the demand for her painted trays," added Lawson.

In her limited spare time, Christine began to teach tray painting to others in Duxbury. "Mom was an inspiration to other artists, and she taught everybody in town, (including another accomplished local artist, Bobbie Cutler, who co-founded the *Duxbury Clipper*)," said Lawson.

After Christine's stroke, she taught herself how to paint with her left hand, and was still so good that she continued to sell her trays to Shreve, Crump & Low, added Bea Richards who resides next door to the Seth Bartlett House.

Charles Bartlett, or "Uncle Charlie" as everyone called him remained living in the house at Surplus Street until his death in 1966 at the age of 95 years old. Charles had been left deaf from scarlet fever at the age of 17. He

was an avid reader, and his Duxbury Free Library card was number 1, noted Richards. She recalled the day that World War I ended. "Everyone was out in the streets, guns were shot off, and when we went over to tell Charlie the good news, he said he wouldn't believe it until he read it in the newspaper the next day," laughed Richards.

For 146 years this beautiful house remained in the Bartlett family. Then in 1979, it was sold to Suzanne and Henry Stout who did extensive remodeling and made additional improvements, until they sold the house in 1991. It is hard to believe this lovely residence with its Queen Anne features was once a Cape Cod house, the site of a industrious shoe shop and a furniture repair and manufacturing business, and a place where famous painted trays were skillfully created and delivered to Shreve, Crump & Low.

Next in this series, we will visit three homes all built by one family and explore the history behind the architecture of the Cape Cod style as we journey down one of Duxbury's oldest pathways.